DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 248 520 CS 208 548

AUTHOR Soven, Margot
TITLE Changes in Teaching Practices: What Happens after the Writing Across the Curriculum Workshop?
PUB DATE Mar 84
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (35th, New York, NY, March 29-31, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Content Area Writing; Curriculum Development; Higher Education; Inservice Teacher Education; *Instructional Improvement; *Program Effectiveness; Teacher Improvement; *Teacher Workshops; Teaching Methods; Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

The question of what to do "after the workshop" has been treated only in passing by writing across the curriculum experts. When planning the writing across the curriculum program at La Salle University (Philadelphia), the writing faculty decided to make continued "after the workshop" interaction with the writing specialist an integral part of the program. After two years of the program, the faculty planners were able to draw the following conclusions about how teaching practices had changed: (1) new writing assignments were introduced; (2) some instructors retained some former assignments but modified them by changing scope, clarifying the instructions, or defining them more completely in terms of rhetorical context, including purpose and audience; (3) some instructors added explanations of evaluative criteria to assignment specifications; (4) some instructors added additional class time for instruction related to the assignment; (5) about half the instructors evaluated student papers with the aid of a checklist and abbreviated symbols; (6) some instructors phased assignments so that a preliminary "stage" of the assignment was evaluated by the instructor before the student completed the assignment; and (7) some instructors revised the objectives of their course and the accompanying reading materials. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED248520

"Changes in Teaching Practices: What Happens After the Writing Across the Curriculum Workshop?"

by

Margot Soven, Ph.D.
La Salle University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Margot Soven

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 208 548

In a sense those of us who began writing across the curriculum projects, as we did at La Salle University in 1982, have had the luxury of worrying about what to do "after the honeymoon is over." Writing Across the Curriculum as an educational phenomena is proceeding through three stages: the development of a theoretical base and accompanying subject matter, the working out of procedures for conducting workshops, and the discovery of strategies for making it all "stick." Early efforts, such as the Beaver College Program, helped to shape the content of future writing across the curriculum projects. Elaine Maimon brought rhetoriticians such as James Kinneavy and Edward Corbett to Beaver as well as scholars in composition research such as Linda Flower, Ellen Nold and Lynn Bloom to help us decide how we could enable teachers to create contexts for meaningful writing in all disciplines. Then people like Toby Fulweiler gave us a model for conducting faculty workshops, urging us to use the inductive approach ("Showing Not Telling at a Writing Workshop," College English Jan. 1981.). Lee Odell helped us to refine the content of our workshops ("The Process of Writing and the Process of Learning," College English, Feb. 1980) by calling attention to the writing assignment. He urged specifying the cognitive operations suggested by the assignment, thereby clarifying those operations for ourselves as well as our students. Ann Herrington, elaborating on Odell's work, ("Writing to Learn: Writing Across the Disciplines," College English,, 1981) in her workshops at Johnson State College, demonstrated how the writing assignment can become the artifact produced during the workshop. But the

question of what to do after the workshop, has been treated only in passing by writing across the curriculum experts.

Before we can address that question seriously, we should take the advice Paul Bryant offered about teaching composition in 1973 and apply it to writing across the curriculum. He said, "Once a principle is established it can be stated and used, and need not be reestablished for every new generation."[1] Earlier writing across the curriculum projects have helped us establish several "principles" that seem pretty reliable:

1. If writing is to become an integral part of teaching and learning substantial course changes are often required. In particular how writing is assigned becomes as important as what writing is assigned.

2. The workshop is a good place to begin faculty development. People need to reflect on and discuss new ideas before they can implement them in their teaching.

3. Writing assignments can become a powerful vehicle for implementing change.

When planning our writing across the curriculum program at La Salle University, we did not try to "reinvent the wheel." We agreed on the need for workshops and a focus on the writing assignment, but realized that we needed a structure for assuring implementation of change in classroom practices. Based on what we knew about the difficulty of changing teaching behaviors even when the teachers are dissatisfied with their current practices and anxious to change them, we decided to make continued "after the workshop"

interaction with the writing specialist an integral part of our program. In a given year we would work with only a small number of instructors. Ten to twelve instructors and a writing specialist would be committed to continued collaboration throughout the academic year following the summer workshops. When we began we were not sure of the form of the collaboration, nor of the kinds of change we might anticipate.

At the completion of two years of the program, we are able to draw some conclusions about how teaching practices have changed. It is obvious (and I guess predictable) that all teachers do not make the same kinds of changes, and that modifications put in place are strongly conditioned by the instructor's teaching style, the nature of the subject matter, and perhaps most importantly, the kinds of writing the instructor had assigned before the workshop. What follows is a discussion of the changes in teaching practices most frequently observed followed by a brief description of the process which brought these changes about.

Changes in Teaching Practices

1. New writing assignments are introduced. For example, instructors who have never tried journals may be motivated to do so. A teacher may want to try informal writing, or perhaps decide to abandon the ten page research paper (as was the case for an instructor in our religion department) in favor of shorter but related papers. In the case of the instructor in religion, students were asked to define "religious myth" in the first paper and then identify aspects of revitalization movements informed by religious

the second paper.

2. An instructor may retain former assignments but modify them by changing their scope, clarifying the instructions, or defining them more completely in terms of a rhetorical context including purpose and audience. These types of changes are probably the most frequent result of our writing across the curriculum program. Many instructors have already thought long and hard about the kinds of assignments they use to achieve their learning objectives. But they are not at all sure that they are presenting their assignments in ways that optimize the possibility of students completing the assignments successfully. For example, an instructor in the management department is concerned about the quality of the case reports his students submit. As a result of the workshop he realizes that he should probably give students some suggestions for how to think through the assignment as well as how to organize the report.

However, when it comes to specifying purpose and audience for assignments, not all instructors are convinced of the need to do so, although those that have tried it, believe that defining purpose and audience probably helped students write better papers.

3. An instructor may add explanation of evaluative criteria to assignment specifications. In such different disciplines as philosophy, finance, and foreign languages teachers seem to make this change. Some prefer a more complex explanation, others a simplified general description of criteria, but most instructors seem to agree that giving students the evaluative criteria can help

the student execute the assignment.

4. An instructor may add additional class time for instruction related to the assignment. In general teachers seem more inclined to add additional class time when the assignment is first introduced and less willing to allocate class time to the assignment during various stages of its execution. In one case an instructor in the education department decided that it might be a good idea to have a lesson practicing accurate observation before her students go out to write field reports. Another instructor in the business school decided to show his students models of good case reports when he introduced the assignment. In a philosophy class before asking students to write journals the instructor initiated a discussion on journal writing throughout the ages, with accompanying examples from great journal keepers such as Samuel Pepys. Several instructors have experimented with peer review (a finance class swapped reports prior to submitting them.) A philosophy class exchanged and reviewed introductions prior to completing their papers. Only one teacher to my knowledge used peer collaboration during the pre-writing stage. A spanish teacher had students review their transcriptions of a tape recording that they would be using as the basis for an essay.

5. When it came to evaluation about half the instructors in the project evaluated student papers with the aid of a check-list and abbreviated symbols, a practice they had not used previously. They found that the check-list helped them to be more objective and to relay comments back to the students more clearly though

they realized that to develop a good check-list takes some experimentation.

6. Some instructors phased assignments so that a preliminary "stage" of the assignment is evaluated by the instructor before the student completes the assignment. The "stage" is rarely a draft of the whole paper (only two teachers tried collecting drafts); teachers who carry a four course load feel that they do not have the time to read drafts. Often the "stage" consisted of the introductory paragraph, of an essay, the annotated bibliography that preceeded the research paper, or in the case of a instructor from the finance department, the analysis section of a case report.

7. Some instructors may make the most dramatic change of all: they revise the objectives of their course and the accompanying reading materials. For example, a philosophy teacher who teaches an introductor course decided to reduce the number of works read, and spend more time discussing each one, to reinforce what he now realizes should be the goal of the course, which is to help students understand several major philosophical concepts rather than become acquainted with the works of many philosophers.

Participants in our workshop sometimes realized that their goals for a particular course were unrealistic. For example, in evaluating the assignment that asks students to write a critique of an article in an introductory course in sociology, the instructor began to question the plausibility of asking students to evaluate materials in an introductory course.

The La Salle Project

The changes implemented by the participants in our program evolved through a series of stages, beginning in the summer workshop and often ending with the examination of a group of student papers written in response to the assignment under discussion. It should be noted that not only are the "products" of a writing across the curriculum program different for different teachers, but the process is as well. All of the teachers participated in the summer week-long workshop (24 hours) that used the writing assignment as a rubric for discussing writing across the curriculum theory and was intended to culminate with teachers redesigning writing assignments. But we discovered that teachers were not yet ready for this second stage at the moment the workshop ended. They needed time to "incubate" ideas and consequently much of the work of actually redesigning assignments and the instruction related to them took place throughout the following year.

I met at least once with each instructor after the workshop and during the academic year and continued to work with some instructors on a regular basis. The scenario was never quite the same. Sometimes we began by reviewing former student papers to decide exactly where the assignment went wrong. Often we started with the assignment itself, critiquing it for clarity, as well as other characteristics. This often involved a somewhat lengthy correspondence between me and the instructor. Drafts of assignments went back and forth in campus mail. Examples of student papers arrived in my box with great regularity along with a request to

"take a look." In return I sent materials for review (--"Do you think this handout would be good for a class lesson on summary writing?) Plans for experimental lessons were devised and cheerfully executed collaboratively. In one instance, when my colleague in the psychology department became ill, I took the plunge alone and presented a lesson on summarizing material in psychology journals that we had planned. Together we had reviewed a sample article and devised a process for summarizing its material based on our analysis of its structure. My part was to explain the purpose of summary writing, as it applied to this material; hers was to answer any questions about the material itself. Luckily, because we had worked on the assignment together I was able to field questions about content, though with some trepidation, I must admit.

At La Salle University we have learned it takes time for teachers to assimilate new information and translate it into teaching practices. It takes forethought. For example, if a teacher decides to spend a whole class period explaining a writing assignment, material previously included may now be omitted. To use student papers as models teachers must start saving papers, something most teachers don't do.

It also takes time to analyze why students are having difficulties with a particular writing assignment. Perhaps the assignment is too ambitious, the students lack the necessary skills for the assignment, or the assignment has been presented poorly.

This is not to say that the La Salle model is the only good model for writing across the curriculum faculty development.

However, our experience does suggest that expectations for change should be modest if some kind of "after-workshop" follow up activity is not included in the faculty development program. As we have demonstrated, admittedly with small numbers, instructors often do not make revolutionary changes in their practices of assigning writing, even as a result of a fairly intensive program. However, much still needs to be learned about the kinds of changes produced by various models of writing across the curriculum faculty development before we can predict with greater confidence the results of any one particular model.

Endnotes

Gary Tate, ed. Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographic Essays, Urbana, NCTE, 1976, vii.